



U.S.-EU

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR ONLINE PLATFORMS ON PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ONLINE

March 2024

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INTRODUCTION

The United States and the European Union are dedicated to the protection of human rights offline and online. We collaborate within various forums and frameworks, including through the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC), to uphold and advance human rights and protect HRDs ¹ around the world. Within the TTC, we are working together to address human rights risks stemming from the misuse of digital technologies, including unlawful surveillance and the targeting of HRDs online.

HRDs – including but not limited to members of human rights nongovernmental organizations, trade unionists, journalists, lawyers, environmental activists, women’s rights advocates, representatives of indigenous peoples, youth activists, and advocates fighting against racism and all other forms of discrimination – play a crucial role in protecting human rights offline and online. HRDs are often targeted online because of their work to defend human rights. Significant threats to HRDs stem from state and non-state actors who target HRDs online, including through arbitrary or unlawful online surveillance, harassment, smear campaigns, disinformation, doxxing, and by silencing HRDs on online platforms.

Online targeting of HRDs often happens in conjunction with or facilitates physical threats, including beatings, killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions. Women HRDs, LGBTI HRDs, and defenders from other marginalized groups who experience multiple and intersecting discriminations and oppressions are disproportionately impacted by such threats and attacks.

Concerned by the rapid growth of these threats against HRDs, we have prioritized joint efforts to globally advance HRD protection through our development of guidance for our missions overseas ² as well as through our work to protect HRDs online within the TTC.

The rights enshrined 75 years ago in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and later in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights apply offline and online. They have been endorsed globally and serve as a common point of reference for governments and the private sector regarding the human rights that may be impacted by the use of technology. Furthermore, technology companies have a

1. Human Rights Defenders is understood in line with the [United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#).

Please visit OHCHR website for more information [about Human Rights Defenders](#) and the work they do.

2. For more information, see: U.S. Support for [Human Rights Defenders Fact Sheet](#); [EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024](#), for more information on EU policies refer to the [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#).

responsibility to respect human rights in line with the [United Nations \(UN\) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and, where applicable, the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct for Multinational Enterprises](#). Given their ubiquity and importance to many aspects of individuals' lives, online platforms and the broader ecosystem of Internet intermediaries have enormous potential to leverage their resources and influence to reinforce respect for human rights and protect those who risk their lives to defend these rights.

This document sets out 10 recommendations that online platforms should take in partnership with stakeholders to improve HRD safety globally. These recommendations apply to online platforms that operate global cross-border services, as well as those that operate in specific regions or countries.

The United States and the European Union encourage online platforms to use these recommendations to determine and implement concrete steps to identify and mitigate risks to HRDs on or through their services or products. The measures taken by online platforms should be based on holistic risk assessments that take into account local circumstances. By implementing the recommended actions, online platforms will set in place processes to mitigate the risk that their products or services will compromise access to information or privacy rights or will be linked to threats and abuses of HRDs, including unjust restrictions on freedoms of expression or association. The recommendations set out clear actions to enhance HRD safety and to further respect for the human rights of all individuals online.

These recommendations reflect commitments we made with global partners through the [Declaration for the Future of the Internet](#). They also reflect key principles of U.S. and EU legislation, initiatives, and policies to safeguard human rights online, such as the EU Digital Services Act. The recommendations in this document do not impose or supersede requirements under U.S. or EU law. These recommendations may be followed by further actions taken by the United States or the European Union to promote rights-respecting approaches by online platforms to address the needs of HRDs.

The recommendations were informed by extensive stakeholder consultations organized by the United States and the European Union between January 2023 and February 2024. Participants included CSOs, HRDs, experts in digital and physical safety, organizations that have served as trusted partners, private tech companies, trust and safety experts, mental health professionals, and UN experts.

The United States and the European Union intend to continue engaging with stakeholders to promote the recommended actions and facilitate their implementation.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR ONLINE PLATFORMS TO IMPROVE HRD PROTECTION

1. Commit to an HRD Protection Policy.

Online platforms should elaborate and publish an unequivocal commitment to respect human rights and protect HRDs. This commitment should reflect stakeholder input and be endorsed by top leadership and integrated throughout their operations.

2. Identify Risks to HRDs.

Online platforms should identify risks to HRDs that could occur on or through their products and services, in line with their responsibility to respect human rights. Risk assessments should be comprehensive, informed by stakeholder consultation, and updated regularly and as new technical capabilities are integrated and deployed, drawing upon the best available company-internal and -external evidence. Further, as certain risks, such as gender-based violence, disproportionately and uniquely impact women and LGBTI HRDs, online platforms should incorporate a gender perspective into their risk assessments. Online platforms should communicate these risks to HRDs publicly and, as appropriate, to affected HRDs.

3. Exchange Information with HRDs, CSOs, and Industry Peers.

Online platforms should establish an ongoing and transparent dialogue with diverse networks of HRDs and other relevant stakeholders to build trust and improve the effective protection of HRDs. Relevant stakeholders should include trusted partners as well as relevant legal experts and broader civil society representatives. Online platforms should work with industry peers to identify cross-platform risks to HRDs and improve HRD protection efforts.

4. Create a Policy Implementation Plan to Mitigate Risk and Prevent Adverse Impacts with Monitoring Benchmarks to Measure Success.

Online platforms should develop a comprehensive implementation plan for their HRD protection policy. This plan should reflect identified risks to HRDs and spell out how these risks can be mitigated and addressed to prevent adverse impacts with clear benchmarks to measure ongoing effectiveness. Effective implementation of policy commitments hinges on the development of internal roadmaps for how this policy will be executed through careful planning, adequate resourcing, tailored training, and meaningful consultation with internal and external stakeholders.

5. Resource and Staff HRD Protection Efforts.

Online platforms should prioritize staffing and other resourcing for HRD-specific risk identification and protection efforts, including by fully resourcing human rights, trust and safety, and fact-checking functions and by training staff and contractors on how to identify and address risks to HRDs. Online platforms should be prepared to rapidly allocate resources in anticipation of and in response to urgent HRD needs,

especially during major events carrying heightened risks to HRDs, including elections, protests, protracted conflict, or evolving crisis situations.

6. Build Capacity to Address Risks in Local Contexts.

Online platforms should build internal capabilities to take into account regional specificities and indicators of heightened risk to HRDs in the countries in which their platforms are available. This includes building local language capacities and understanding and awareness of local restrictions on civic space in each country or region. Online platforms should mobilize additional capacity when they identify a foreseeable risk of harm. Online platforms should provide trauma-informed training and psychosocial resources to contractors and staff who play a role in incident response efforts in all regions and countries of operation.

7. Provide Safety Tools and Security Education to HRDs.

Online platforms should provide context-appropriate, user-friendly settings and tools, with clear instructions, to enable HRDs and trusted partners representing them to quickly secure or disable their accounts and/or enable optional enhanced privacy features. Digital security features, including safety and privacy enhancing features, and educational materials about these features should be provided in local languages.

8. Create and Maintain Accessible Incident Reporting Channels for HRDs.

With adequate staffing and resources in place, online platforms should establish effective, accessible, secure, and responsive incident reporting channels that will enable rapid coordination with HRDs and trusted civil society intermediaries to address and mitigate the impacts of incidents targeting HRDs on or through their products or services. To the extent possible, online platforms should promptly notify HRDs of incidents they may not otherwise be aware of and that pose a concrete threat to their safety.

9. Contribute to and Provide Access to Remedy.

Online platforms should seek to mitigate risks to HRDs and prevent adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to their operations, products, or services and ensure that HRDs have access to redress and appeals mechanisms so that HRDs who report harassment or abuse have a means of recourse in case of an unfavorable outcome.

10. Commit to Transparency, Public Reporting, and Continuous Improvement.

Online platforms should monitor and evaluate efficacy of HRD protection efforts, commit to continuous learning, report on findings, and translate lessons learned into demonstrable improvements in company policies and processes.

The United States and the European Union intend to continue to engage with HRDs, emergency assistance providers, trusted partners, online platforms, and other stakeholders to address online challenges and risks to HRDs and promote and facilitate the implementation of appropriate safety and protection measures.



Concerned by the rapid growth of threats against human rights defenders (HRDs), the United States and the European Union have prioritized joint efforts to globally advance HRD protection.

